3 Prophetic Warnings From America's Founding Fathers That Have Gone Unheeded

One of the human race's favorite games, according to G.K. Chesterton, is called "Cheat the Prophet." In this age-old game, the players listen to what wise or clever men say, and when they die, they bury them nicely and go an do something different.

As it is about that time when we celebrate the birth of American independence and remember the trials our Founding Fathers endured, the wisdom they imparted, and the genius of the system we have inherited from them. And since they have all been buried nicely, we have gone and made something rather different.

Here are just three of the many warnings and predictions those wise men passed to us, but that have been ignored to our peril.

Ben Franklin on Paying Congress

During the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Benjamin Franklin rose to make a radical proposal: that no salary be given to the lawmakers.

> "Sir, there are two passions which have a powerful influence in the affairs of men. These are ambition and avarice—the love of power and the love of money. Separately, each of these has great force in prompting men to action; but, when united in view of the same object, they have, in many minds, the most violent effects."

While attributed a number of evils to the idea of a paid legislature, citing the dual benefit of honor and money for serving as an elected official "the true source of all those factions which are perpetually dividing the nation, distracting its councils, hurrying it sometimes into fruitless and mischievous wars, and often compelling a submission to dishonorable terms of peace."

Franklin also prophesied the sort of elected officials that would be found in the future United States of America:

> "And of what kind are the men that will strive for this profitable preeminence, through all the bustle of cabal, the heat of contention, the infinite mutual abuse of parties, tearing to pieces the best of characters? It will not be the wise and moderate, the lovers of peace and good order, the men fittest for the trust. It will be the bold and the violent, the men of strong passions and indefatigable activity in their selfish pursuits. These will thrust themselves into your government and be your rulers."

Franklin's fellow framers of the Constitution disagreed, and deciding on a rate of pay was deferred to the first session of the new Unites States congress two years later. The idea was that a reasonable, or moderate salary would be sufficient. The first pay legislators received was a per diem of $6 a day, which would equate, after considering inflation, to a 2014 salary of $56,210 for a 365 day year, or $19,509.84 for 126 days in actual session, such as the Congress had in 2013.

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Franklin cautioned that even starting out with a reasonable goal would not remain so for long.

> "Besides these evils, sir, tho we may set out in the beginning with moderate salaries, we shall find that such will not be of long continuance. Reasons will never be wanting for proposed augmentations; and there will always be a party for giving more to the rulers, that the rulers may be able, in return, to give more to them. Hence, as all history informs us, there has been in every state and kingdom a constant kind of warfare between the governing and the governed; the one striving to obtain more for its support, and the other to pay less. And this has alone occasioned great convulsions, actual civil wars, ending either in dethroning of the princes or enslaving of the people."

Today, regular members of the House of Representatives and Senate receive an annual salary of $174,000, plus pension and health care benefits. They also receive an allowance to defray the cost of doing official business: their office at the Capitol, their home office, travel back and forth to their home district and D.C., staff salaries, and other "representational duties." These annual allowances start at over $1.2 million for a Representative and $2.9 million for a Senator.

On top of this compensation, members of Congress may still draw an income from their investments, businesses, or other profitable ventures.

Clearly there has been a tremendous creep from a per diem of $6 ($154.84 in 2014 dollars) to compensate and cover expenses to the attractive compensation received by the current legislature. That $6 a day, paid for every day of the year, would equate to just a bit more than the median salary of a 2012 U.S. household of $51,371. Instead, it is more than three times that number, not counting at least a million dollar expense account.

Franklin was right on the inability to maintain a moderate rate of pay. What about everything else?

Compared to the rest of the over $3 trillion spending by the government each year, the compensation for congressional members is a huge drop in an overwhelmingly large bucket. The effects of a paid legislature are perhaps better seen in light of the financial motivation for the individual than the overall expense.

Is it any wonder that we have such an onslaught of negative campaign advertising, "the bustle of cabal, the heat of contention, the infinite mutual abuse of parties, tearing to pieces the best of characters" during every campaign year?

It is a small wonder that the approval ratings of Congress has remained low, for we have surely invited the "bold and the violent, the men of strong passions and indefatigable activity in their selfish pursuits" to be our lawmakers. If there is any lingering doubt about that, revisit some recent political campaign commercials on Youtube.

George Washington on Political Parties

Almost a decade after Franklin's prophetic warning, George Washington was coming to the end of his second term as President. A great deal of his now-famous Farewell Address consists in a warning about factions dividing the unity of the Unites States' government.

> "The unity of government which constitutes you one people is also now dear to you. It is justly so, for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize."

The threat to this unity would come from factions, predicted Washington, of geographical or other natures.

> "... designing men may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views. One of the expedients of party to acquire influence within particular districts is to misrepresent the opinions and aims of other districts. You cannot shield yourselves too much against the jealousies and heartburnings which spring from these misrepresentations; they tend to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection."

Washington described this "fatal tendency" that would put "in the place of the delegated will of the nation the will of a party, often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community; and, according to the alternate triumphs of different parties, to make the public administration the mirror of the ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the organ of consistent and wholesome plans digested by common counsels and modified by mutual interests."

Regardless of the reasons for the factions forming, the would be led by the few and the powerful, a party machine, or "engine," as Washington refers to it, will lead to tyranny.

> "However combinations or associations of the above description may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely, in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion."

Without quoting the bulk of Washington's address, he refers to the unchecked spirit of factions and party politics as a government's "greatest rankness" and that its "worst enemy," and a nightmare that can become "itself a frightful despotism"

> "It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foments occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another."

Washington stated that it was the "interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain [the spirit of party]" and that "there being constant danger of excess, the effort ought to be by force of public opinion, to mitigate and assuage it."

One would think that a constant reminder to elected officials would be useful in mitigating and discourage party politics. However, it is a long-standing tradition that Washington's Farewell Address is read each year in the Senate.

Rather than opposing political factions, public opinion and the press seem to have encouraged and, in the latter case, profited greatly from the existence of political parties. As a result, despite increasing interest in third-party politicians running for office, numerous barriers exist that favor the current two-party engines, from ballot restrictions keeping them off the ballot to the media keeping them out of the broadcasted debates. This is hardly "discouraging the spirit of party," but rather an encouraging of it.

The minority of people involved in running the two major political parties now have more say on who rules us than the majority of Americans; all we get to do is choose the lesser of two evils on election day.

Thomas Jefferson on Religious Liberty

In October of 1801, The Danbury Baptist Association wrote a letter to newly-elected President Thomas Jefferson, expressing concern about religious liberty. Specifically, they were concerned that the right to free religious expression was a favor of the government, sometimes granted begrudgingly and subject to revocation or revision:

> "Our sentiments are uniformly on the side of religious liberty: that Religion is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals, that no man ought to suffer in name, person, or effects on account of his religious opinions, [and] that the legitimate power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbor. But sir, our constitution of government is not specific… that Religion is considered as the first object of Legislation, and therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the State) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights. And these favors we receive at the expense of such degrading acknowledgments, as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen."

Jefferson's response is now famous for the phrase "a wall of separation between Church and State," perhaps the most powerful phrase ever uttered in a private letter. Imagine if fellow Founding Father Benjamin Franklin's 1781 letter to the Royal Academy of Brussels would have had the same role in dictating U.S. scientific policy as Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists!

Here is the full letter from Jefferson to the Danbury Baptists, dated January 1, 1802:

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature would 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties."

The "wall" that Jefferson refers to in this personal letter has been used to quash religious expression, even when that private expression was, according to Jefferson, an inalienable, natural right.

There is even more context from Jefferson's writings, personal and official, that sheds more light on his attitude towards religious liberty and freedom of religious expression.

On November 20, 1808, the Methodist Episcopal Church of Pittsburgh wrote President Jefferson a note of thanks for his service .

"We were told by your enemies, on the commencement of your Precidential career; that your principles were such, as, totally to discountinance revealed religion; that we might burn our bibles, for the floodgates of infidellity, would be opened on the followers of Emanuel, and religion would be banished from the states of the union—But we are happy, and thankfull, that it is in our power to say, that so far from this haveing been the case; we have sat under our vine, and under our fig tree, worshiping God, agreeable to the dictates of our consciences, none making us affraid."

Jefferson responded a month later, calling the right to freedom of religious opinion and exercise "sacred":

"Having ever been an advocate for the freedom of religious opinion and exercise, from no person, certainly, was an abridgment of these sacred rights to be apprehended less than from myself.

In justice, too, to our excellent Constitution, it ought to be observed, that it has not placed our religious rights under the power of any public functionary. The power, therefore, was wanting, not less than the will, to injure these rights."

In a letter dated January 23, 1808 to the Reverend Samuel Miller, who asked President Jefferson to recommend a day of fasting and prayer, Jefferson wrote:

"I consider the government of the U S. as interdicted by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline, or exercises. This results not only from the provision that no law shall be made respecting the establishment, or free exercise, or religion, but from that also which reserves to the states the powers not delegated to the U.S. Certainly no power to prescribe any religious exercise, or to assume authority in religious discipline, has been delegated to the general government. It must then rest with the states, as far as it can be in any human authority... Fasting & prayer are religious exercises. The enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has a right to determine for itself the times for these exercises, & the objects proper for them, according to their own particular tenets; and this right can never be safer than in their own hands, where the constitution has deposited it."

Jefferson also referred to "fences" in writing to Noah Webster in 1790, which sheds some more light on his idea of freedom of religion and walls:

"That there are also certain fences which experience has proved peculiarly efficacious against wrong, and rarely obstructive of right, which yet the governing powers have ever shewn a disposition to weaken and remove. Of the first kind for instance is freedom of religion: of the second, trial by jury, Habeas corpus laws, free presses."

Here religious freedom is listed first as a fence against wrong, constantly under attack from governing powers with a "disposition to weaken and remove." Written twelve years before he assures the Danbury Baptists that the right to religious freedom is inalienable, natural, and ought to be secured against governmental interference by the "wall of separation" in the First Amendment.

Moving on from Jefferson's personal letters, let's look at some of his official statements on the matter:

"... no power over the freedom of religion, freedom of speech, or freedom of the press being delegated to the United States by the Constitution." (Kentucky Resolution, 1798)

"In matters of religion, I have considered that its free exercise is placed by the Constitution independent of the powers of the general [federal] government." (Second Inaugural Address, 1805)

Where, then, is the prophecy in all of this? In response to the Alien and Sedition acts, Jefferson authored the Kentucky Resolution of 1798, from which the following passage is taken:

"And that in addition to this general principle and express declaration, another and more special provision has been made by one of the amendments to the Constitution, which expressly declares, that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press': **thereby guarding in the same sentence, and under the same words, the freedom of religion, of speech, and of the press: insomuch, that whatever violated either, throws down the sanctuary which covers the others**, arid that libels, falsehood, and defamation, equally with heresy and false religion, are withheld from the cognizance of federal tribunals."

Jefferson believed that the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment would survive or fail together, should any one of them become infringed upon by the government. That included the government being "interdicted by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline, or exercises."

In our country today there are frequent enough stories of children in schools being told not to pray. The question of whether the federal government may require an individual or their business to alter their faith-guided practices or act against the doctrines of the faith they profess. Ironically, Jefferson's own words about a "wall of separation" are used by the governing powers to weaken and remove the fence of religious freedom. The metaphor has become more powerful than the meaning.

In Jefferson's opinion, if we lose the protection of religious freedom, we will quickly lose the freedom of speech and the press.

We have dismissed the predictions of Franklin and Washington, and we can see clearly that we have brought about the very things they warned would happen. Will we also fail to heed the warning of Jefferson about freedom of religious practice and religion?

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